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ABSTRACT

A discussion of pronunciation instruction in English for business communication focuses on raising learners' awareness of how English is spoken by various language groups around the world. It is argued that phonological consciousness-raising is an effective approach for limiting breakdowns in communication. The approach assumes that developing native-like English productive skills is not a primary goal of instruction, but that developing receptive skills is a goal. Based on voice recordings of 12 English-speakers from eight different countries, a series of classroom pronunciation tasks was designed. Tasks targeting comparison skills include: comparing General American English (GAE) with British Received Pronunciation (RP); comparing GAE and/or RP with non-native speakers; and comparing the learner's speech with native speakers. Comprehension-based tasks include: summarizing; word recognition; and identifying voice quality and characteristics. Some pedagogical suggestions are offered. Contains 5 references. (MSE)

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# Phonological Consciousness Raising Tasks for the ESP Classroom

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**Abstract**

This paper summarizes how to incorporate "phonological consciousness raising" in a pronunciation class for adult learners using English for business communication. Based on voice recordings of twelve English speakers from eight different countries, a series of pronunciation tasks were designed to raise learners' awareness of how English is spoken by various language groups. The paper will first begin by looking at the reasons why phonological consciousness raising can be an effective way to approach pronunciation for such learners. This is followed by an outline of the procedures for the study and the pronunciation tasks created based on the study. Finally, the paper concludes with some recommendations and implications for further development of such tasks.

## Introduction

With the shift of language teaching toward a communicative methodology, the question of pronunciation's role in the communicative classroom has come under consideration. Some will say that pronunciation basically has become irrelevant to the goals of the communicative classroom, while others like Rita Wong (1985) will argue quite the opposite:

> ...if we look closely at the components of the communicative process, we will see that pronunciation is one of the more important means by which we achieve our communicative objectives (p. 227).

In support of Wong's statement above, I agree that pronunciation does play an important role in communication and therefore deserves attention in the classroom. The main question however is in what ways should pronunciation be handled in the classroom so that our learners are consciously aware of how pronunciation can help or prevent one from achieving their communicative objectives. It is this concern that prompted me to look more carefully at the role of pronunciation instruction with my learners.

All of my learners are adults working for a major U.S. company that conducts business all over the globe. Many of their coworkers are from various countries. Therefore, English is needed for meetings, presentations, phone calls, and general on the job communication. It is fair to say that all of my learners have had at least 8 years of English language instruction. I consider their overall pronunciation good enough to communicate with few major communication breakdowns. Breakdowns generally occur due to lack of speaking and listening fluency. Therefore, I had to consider in what ways could we address pronunciation in the classroom. Traditionally, I have only addressed individual segmental or supra-segmental errors that caused breakdowns in their communication. Such breakdowns were few and far between. As for their perception and comprehension of sounds, they did not seem to have any major difficulties understanding me. Therefore, we can say that in the classroom we were successfully achieving our communicative objectives.

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However, when the same learners used English on the job with coworkers from other countries, various breakdowns occurred. Of course there are many factors that could have contributed to their difficulties in achieving their communicative objectives, but one factor that seem to stand out was simply the contrast between my 'teacher-like' pronunciation of General American English (GAE) and the various non-GAE accents they were exposed to on the job. As a result, I decided to look into ways that I could raise their awareness of how English is spoken by other language groups. My goal was not to change the pronunciation of their coworkers so that they all communicated with near-native accents, but rather to incorporate 'phonological consciousness raising' in the classroom of the various accents they were exposed to on the job. It is my hope that such phonological consciousness raising would improve their comprehension and thereby help these learners to successfully achieve their communicative objectives outside of the classroom as well.

## Phonological Consciousness Raising

In order to support the usage of phonological consciousness raising with my learners, I considered two questions: 1) Is native-like pronunciation a goal? and 2) Should time be spent on building perceptive phonological skills in the classroom?

### Question 1: Is native-like pronunciation a goal?

Theories on interlanguage phonology suggest that there is a critical period after which learners cannot achieve an "accent-free" level of pronunciation. Some researchers even go so far as suggesting that second language phonological attainment is *impossible* unless first exposed to the language at a very early age (Long, p. 268). Such hypotheses are based on maturational constraints that physiologically and cognitively prevent adults from ever acquiring native-like pronunciation. Therefore, it has been suggested that pronunciation instruction, especially in the case of learners who are past this "critical age," center around maintaining accurate enough pronunciation to allow communication to happen. Anything beyond this is generally considered instructional time that should be spent on more productive/appropriate pronunciation tasks. However, all studies up until this point regarding the critical age hypothesis have produced mixed results. According to Ellis (1994) it is possible under ideal circumstances for learners starting after this critical age to produce speech that cannot easily be distinguished from that of native speakers. Yet, regardless if it is possible or not, the question still remains – Does native-like pronunciation *need* to be a goal?

When considering this, I feel that it does not need to be a goal because my learners currently have accurate enough pronunciation to achieve their communicative purposes. Since they are all well past this "critical age" suggested by many applied linguists, time spent in the classroom trying to develop native-like pronunciation may not be time well spent. Furthermore, on the job my learners are exposed to various accented forms of English. To suggest that only native-like pronunciation should be the goal of instruction would conflict with those speakers of English in the office who do not possess native-like control of the English sound system.

### Question 2: Should time be spent on building perceptive phonological skills in the classroom?

Before deciding whether or not classroom time needed to be spent on developing per-

ceptive phonological skills, I approached a small handful of my learners and asked them what makes it difficult to understand other speakers of English such as Indians, Chinese, Phillipinos, etc. Some comments that stood out are as follows:

- *They speak English differently.*
- *Some words and phrases sound different.*
- *Not all words are clear.*

Their comments could be based on the fact that they are used to "teacher talk" and that for most of their English language instruction in school they were mainly exposed to samples of GAE and/or British Received Pronunciation (RP). These voiced concerns seemed to focus on an inability to grasp segmental and supra-segmental variants. For example, I asked the learner who stated that "*Not all words are clear*," to give me an example. She said that for awhile she did not realize that her manager from The Philippines was saying the word "category." He pronounces the word as /kat griy/ rather then the GAE pronunciation /kat goriy/. This is a word that she is familiar with on the job, but did not understand when her manager said it simply because he pronounced it with three syllables instead of four, and stressed the second syllable rather than the first. We can say that her managers accented pronunciation did not meet her expectation of how the word would be pronounced.

Martha C. Pennington (1987) suggests the use of listening comprehension tasks to help learners bridge the gap between what she calls the "mechanical" and "meaningful" dimensions of pronunciation. In particular she points out the following.

> Listening comprehension exercises can be devised which requires students to pay close attention to *voice quality* in order to be able to correctly identify situational features such as the relationship between speakers and the purpose of the communication (1987, p. 14) (emphasis added)

Pennington's ideas fall right in line with the idea of incorporating perceptive phonological skills in the classroom. By having learners identify differences in such things as voice quality and voice characteristics, they are developing a conscious awareness of phonological variants between speakers. In other words, they are building knowledge about how familiar words pronounced by other speakers of English may or may not meet their expectations about pronunciation; hence, phonological consciousness raising.

By answering these two questions I saw the inherent value in spending some classroom time raising my learners awareness of phonological differences and thereby improving their ability to achieve their communicative objectives on the job.

### Procedures for Collecting Voice Samples

Twelve people volunteered to have their voices recorded on tape for the purposes of this study. The breakdown of participants are as follows: 2 male Indians, 2 Phillipinos (1 male and 1 female), 2 Americans (1 male and one female), 2 British (1 male and 1 female), 1 male Australian, 1 male Taiwanese, 1 male Chinese, and 1 female Japanese. These people were quite eager to participate because they have experienced communication breakdowns which they feel could be partly attributed to

how they sound when speaking English. It is important to note that the Americans, British, and Australian participants were included mainly for the purpose of comparing GAE and RP to other forms of non-native accented English. (Comparative pronunciation tasks will be outlined later in the paper.)

Basically, the 12 participants were asked to record their voice while reading a prepared transcript. The transcript is of the opening of a business meeting in where the meeting leader needs to make three general announcements before starting the discussion. (See Appendix I) When preparing the transcript I considered the following three points:

1. To make the recording sound "authentic," words were not pre-selected for the purpose of eliciting contrastive phonemes. I simply wrote what might typically occur at the opening of a meeting.
2. To downplay the effect of unfamiliar technical or specialized vocabulary on comprehension, I assumed that all words would be familiar to the learners since the words are typically heard and used around the office.
3. To eliminate a lack of background knowledge or situational constraint on comprehension, I used a meeting as the context for the transcript since all learners have had experience using and listening to English in meetings.

Therefore, it was my intention that most comprehension problems would simply be due to phonological confusion over voice quality and voice characteristics as opposed to vocabulary, grammar, or lack of schema.

When recording, the participants were instructed not to practice (they were allowed only one "silent reading" before recording), not to alter their speaking speed or pronunciation and speak as they normally would, and to continue speaking even if they made a mistake. If they had any questions regarding how to say a word after their silent reading, I told them to pronounce it "*the way they thought it should be pronounced.*" Basically, I wanted to eliminate "staged" or "rehearsed" recordings.

The final order of the voices on the tape are as follows: 1) Indian male, 2) Chinese male, 3) Taiwanese male, 4) Japanese female, 5) Filipino female, 6) Filipino male, 7) Indian male, 8) British male, 9) British female, 10) Australian male, 11) American male, 12) American female.

### Phonological Consciousness Raising Tasks

What follows is an outline of some phonological consciousness raising tasks using the 12 recordings. I have divided the tasks into two groups: comparison-based tasks and comprehension-based tasks.

### Comparison-Based Tasks

The main purpose of the comparison-based tasks is to raise learners awareness of the differences between GAE, RP, and other accented forms of English as spoken by non-native speakers whose second language is English. One of the comparison

tasks outlined below even has the learners compare their production of the transcript with native speakers. It is important to note that the comparisons are not used for production purposes. (See Appendix II for a copy of the tasks.)

**Task 1)** Comparing GAE with RP: In this task, the learners listen to the two speakers of GAE and the three speakers of RP (2 British and 1 Australian) and try to identify words that "sound different" between the speakers.

**Task 2)** Comparing GAE and/or RP with non-native speakers: In this task, the learners listen to the GAE or RP speakers and three different non-native speakers. Likewise, they try to identify differences between the speakers sounds.

**Task 3)** Comparing the learners' speech with native speakers: In this task, the learners have the chance to record their own voices and have it compared with native speakers' recordings. In this way, learners can discover if they are intelligible or not as compared with native speakers. The purpose here is not to enforce 'native-like' sounds, but rather to see where possible breakdowns may occur due to pronunciation.

For all three of these tasks, the learners can be instructed to look at differences in both segmentals and supra-segmentals. The value of doing such comparative tasks is simply to allow learners to see that native-like speech is not a goal, but rather understandable pronunciation.

**Comprehension-Based Tasks**

The main purpose of the comprehension-based tasks is to see how comprehension of English can be affected by differences in voice quality and voice characteristics of non-native speakers of English. For the tasks summarized below, the recorded voices of the American, British, and Australian speakers are not used for comprehension purposes. As mentioned previously in this paper, all of my learners have been exposed to native speakers of GAE and RP for most of their English language education. Comprehension problems on the job with such speakers is mainly due to speed - native speakers speaking too fast. However, comprehension problems with non-native speakers are mainly due to differences in pronunciation, specifically voice quality and voice characteristics affected by non-native speakers' accented English. (See Appendix III for a copy of the tasks.)

**Task 1)** *Summarizing*: In this task, learners are divided into pairs or small groups. Each pair/group listens to one sample only one time. They are then instructed to write down the three announcements that the speaker gave. Next, the pairs/groups listen to a different sample in order to confirm and/or pick up information that they missed with the first sample. This continues for one more sample. The pairs/groups finally join another pair/group to compare their summaries and look for points of unintelligibility.

**Task 2)** *Word Recognition*: This task is based on the same concept in the summarizing task above, but rather than writing down what they heard, the learners will fill in empty blanks on a copy of the transcript provided to the class. The words selected for deletion are based on predictions that the teacher feels will lead to unintelligibility. For this task, I listened to each sample for common words or

phrases that might cause phonological confusion with my learners. The interesting thing about this task is that learners can try to make educated guesses about what the speaker said based on the surrounding discourse in the transcript. This to me is a valid phonological coping strategy for learners when they are actually communicating on the job.

**Task 3)** *Identifying Voice Quality & Characteristics*: In this task the learners are provided three to four copies of the complete transcript. Three to four non-native voice samples are then selected by the teacher for listening. While listening to each sample, the learners are instructed to follow along with the transcript and do one or all of the following:

> **a.** Focus on stress, rhythm, and intonation patterns - For each sample, the learners can circle stressed words, mark where the speakers pause, etc.
> **b.** Focus on 'different' words - For each sample, the learners can circle any words or phrases that are hard to understand. Learners are simply instructed to identify areas that are incomprehensible.
> **c.** Focus on level of difficulty - The learners listen to each sample and rank them according to difficulty and ease of comprehension. They also need to explain and cite specific reasons why a particular sample is difficult or easy to understand.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

As of now, the six tasks created for this study have not been used in the classroom. Therefore, it is not possible to draw any pedagogical conclusions and recommendations about the effectiveness of phonological consciousness raising for instructional purposes. However, it is possible to draw from some insight regarding the materials used for the task, namely the voice recordings. I have identified the following areas that could have an effect:

1) *Reading the Transcript*: Although for the most part the recordings sound "natural," the participants are not being recorded in actual on-line communication. Also, because they are consciously aware of being recorded, their speech may not be as natural as it would be in a real meeting. Even though the participants were instructed to read the transcript as they normally speak, some linguists have pointed out the mere nature of reading results in more accurate pronunciation because the production is more formal, self-conscious and monitored. (Labov 1972, Dickerson & Dickerson 1977)

2) *Level of Previous Experience Communicating with Non-native Speakers*: This is especially a factor for the native English speakers who participated in the study. Living and working in Japan from a period of one to three years has most likely had an effect on their own pronunciation of English. Typically native speakers who communicate with non-native speakers begin to speak more slowly, use less reductions and enunciate their words more clearly all as preventive measures against communicative breakdowns. One American participant even asked me if she should

speak as if she were really opening a meeting with her Japanese subordinates since in such a situation on the job she would speak differently.

Even though I have not yet put phonological consciousness raising to use in the classroom, I strongly believe it will prove to be a useful way to facilitate comprehension based pronunciation learning for my learners or any group of learners who need to comprehend English as it is spoken by various speakers of the language.

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# Appendix I

## Transcript

Directions: Please read the following information into the tape recorder. Speak as you normally would. In other words, do not try to alter your speed or pronunciation.

*Ok. Thanks for coming to today's category management team meeting. I know that you are all busy so we'll try to keep this meeting within an hour.*

*Before we begin today's discussion I have a few general announcements to make.*

*First, as you are all the contact people for your categories, please make sure that you summarize today's discussion to your people. What we decide today will have a direct impact on their projects.*

*Second, as you all should know, our annual Technical Symposium is only a month away. The theme this year is, 'New Product Initiatives for the year 2000' I strongly suggest that you encourage some of your people to present their breakthrough ideas.*

*And finally, unfortunately this will be my last meeting as the category management team chairperson. From next month, Carla Baum will take over as the new chairperson.*

*OK if there aren't any questions, let's begin.*

## Appendix II

### Comparison-Based Tasks for Phonological Consciousness Raising

**Task 1**: You will listen to different speakers opening a business meeting. Each speaker is saying the same thing, but they may sound a little different.

Listen to Speakers 8 - 12 on the tape. After listening to all 5 speakers, go back and first compare Speaker 8 with Speaker 11. Then compare Speaker 9 with Speaker 12. As you compare, use the transcripts given to you by the teacher and circle words/phrases in the transcripts that sound different. In other words, what word(s) are said differently by each speaker.

**Task 2**: You will listen to different speakers opening a business meeting. Each speaker is saying the same thing, but they may sound a little different.

Listen to Speakers 1, 2, 3 and 11 on the tape. After listening to all 4 speakers, go back and compare speakers 1, 2 and 3 with speaker 11.

As you compare, use the transcripts given to you by the teacher and circle words/phrases in the transcripts that sound different. In other words, what word(s) are said differently between Speaker 1 and 11, Speaker 2 and 11, and Speaker 3 and 11.

**Task 3**: Record your own voice opening the same business meeting. DO NOT practice reading before recording your voice. Only read the transcript ONE time to yourself. When you are through, switch your recording with a partner. Then, compare your partners recording with the native speakers of English on the tape, Speakers 8 - 12. Circle words(s) on the transcript that sound different. Your partner will do the same with your recording. When you are both through, share your comparisons with each other.

## Appendix III

### Comprehension-Bases Tasks for Phonological Consciousness Raising

**Task 1**: You and a partner will listen to three different speakers opening a business meeting. Each speaker is saying the same thing, but they may sound a little different. With a partner listen to Speaker 1 on the tape. You can only listen to the speaker ONE time. After you are listen, work with your partner and write down the three announcements that the speaker says. Use the space below.

It is not necessary to write down every word that the speakers says. A brief summary is OK. Do not worry if you are unable to write down what was said. Simply listen to Speaker 2. After listening to the second speaker, make changes and/or add to your summary.

Continue this until Speaker 3. After this speaker, work with another pair of students and compare your answers. Check for areas that were hard to understand.

Announcement 1:

Announcement 2:

Announcement 3:

**Task 2**: You will listen three different speakers opening a business meeting. Each speaker is saying the same thing, but they may sound a little different.

As you listen to Speaker 1, fill in the missing words in the transcript below. Do not worry if you miss some words. You will have a chance to pick up the words you missed while listening to Speakers 4 and 5. If you are not sure of what you heard, take a guess!

*OK. _____ for _____ to today's category management team meeting. I know that _____ busy so we'll try to keep this meeting _____.*

*_____ we _____ today's discussion I have a few general _____ to make.*

*_____, as you are _____ the _____ for your _____, please make sure that you summarize today's discussion to your _____. _____ decide today will have a _____ impact on their _____.*

*Second, as you _____ should know, our _____ is only a month away. The _____ this year is, "New _____" for the year _____ I _____ suggest that you encourage some of your people to _____ their _____ ideas.*

*And finally, _____ this will be my last _____ as the category management team _____. From next month, _____ will take over as the new chairperson.*

*OK if there _____ questions, let's begin.*

**Task 3**: You will listen to three different speakers opening a business meeting. Each

speaker is saying the same thing, but they may sound a little different. For each speaker you will be given two copies of a transcript of what is said. Therefore, you should have a total of 6 transcripts.

For the first three transcripts do the following: Listen to Speakers 3, 4, and 5 and as you listen to each speaker do two things to your transcripts. 1) circle words that are stressed by the speakers. In other words, circle the words that sound louder or stronger. 2) mark with slashes (/) the points were the speakers pause.

For the last three transcripts do the following: Listen to Speakers 3, 4, and 5 again. As you listen to each speaker circle the words on the transcript that sound different from what you think they should sound like. In other words, circle the words that are not clear to you.

Finally, rank these three speakers on the scale below. Be prepared to explain your rankings:

**Difficult**

Speaker # ___. Why?

Speaker # ___. Why?

Speaker # ___. Why?

**Easy**